

PRESERVING FARMS IN CLARK COUNTY, WASHINGTON

DRAFT Farm Preservation Strategies Report

Executive summary

1. BARRIER - Institutional limitations

The Agriculture Preservation Advisory Committee believes that farm interests could be better represented in the county through two significant institutional changes:

- A. The Board of Clark County Commissioners should appoint an Agricultural Commission to review and provide input on proposed policies and regulations that could have substantial impacts on farmers.
- B. The county should establish Agricultural Production Districts. Agriculture Production Districts are areas, regardless of zoning, where farming will be actively supported by the county over the long term. If designated, Clark County will concentrate its efforts to maintain and enhance agricultural activities in the agricultural production districts. They should be considered priority areas for purchase and/or transfer of development rights and use of cluster development concepts to maintain or aggregate parcels dedicated primarily to agricultural activities.

2. BARRIER - The high cost of land

The dramatic rise in land value during the past two decades has caused problems for many farmers in Clark County. Today, most new farmers cannot afford to acquire good farmland. Existing farmers cannot acquire additional land to expand operations.

- A. Use existing publicly owned land, or have the county acquire farmland, to create a lease-back program for farmers.
- B. Use clustering, transfer of development rights, and density bonuses to encourage landowners to keep land in agricultural use.
- C. Purchase rights to develop farmlands for non-agricultural uses. Place easements on the lands to ensure they are available for agriculture.

D. Put priority on funding a purchase of development rights program for agriculturally productive land in Clark County.

E. Develop a farm-link program matching retiring farmers with current farmers or new farmers to keep land in agricultural production.

3. BARRIER - High production costs and low return for farm products

Farmers describe a variety of economic, regulatory, and social factors that have reduced the profitability of farms during the last several decades. The reasons may vary from one type of farmer to the next, but dairy, vegetable, berry, and livestock farmers agree that it has become difficult to make a living as a farmer in Clark County.

- A. Expand existing tax incentive programs to provide further benefit to farmers.
- B. Assist farmers in securing health insurance through the state of Washington.
- C. Establish a revolving loan fund, primarily financed by farmers, to finance start-up and new investments in agricultural operations.
- D. Develop a county-sponsored cost-sharing program to help farmers meet environmental regulatory requirements.
- E. Explore agricultural cooperatives to help farmers share or reduce production costs and expand markets.

4. BARRIER - Insufficient level of technical support available to local farmers

As the Clark County farming community has decreased in size during the last few decades, there are simply fewer resources for farmers. Traditional sources of technical assistance have been reduced and

committee members indicate that for certain types of assistance they historically accessed locally, they now have to turn to Oregon State University in Corvallis or Washington State University in Mt. Vernon.

- A. Encourage state and national agencies and organizations to provide local expertise in horticulture and livestock.
- B. Establish a “farmbudsperson” within Clark County to help farmers find solutions to agricultural challenges.
- C. Fund an endowment, primarily supported by local farmers through a community foundation, to fund research, technical assistance and education programs that would benefit farmers.

5. BARRIER - Need for better marketing and promotion

Most Clark County farms are family-run operations. Many farmers do not have time or resources to develop marketing outlets or promotional programs. Much of the marketing and promotional activities that do occur are on a small scale and independent from one another. Competition among farmers, particularly new farmers working to establish their livelihood, encourages these independent efforts.

- A. Create a “Clark County Fresh” logo and marketing campaign.
- B. Facilitate permanent sites for local farmers’ markets.
- C. Work with local farmers to create an independent farm marketing association to increase markets for local agricultural products.

6. BARRIER - Regulatory requirements

The combination of environmental, health, and building regulations that apply to agricultural production, processing and distribution are costly and may discourage efficient farming practices.

- A. Review building and health codes for regulatory reform opportunities related to agricultural structures, food preparation and processing.

- B. Allow greater flexibility to farmers regarding development of commercial uses on farm land to support direct marketing of local agricultural products.
- C. Align county code with state requirements regarding housing for farm workers.

7. BARRIER - Population growth and conflicts with farmers

As housing and commercial development spreads into the rural areas, many homes are now close to local farms. Complaints about farm smells, noise, dust, traffic, or conflicts between domestic and farm animals are commonplace. It can also take a significant amount of time, and possibly money, to defend against the most aggressive complaints.

- A. Revise the county’s right-to-farm/forest ordinance to clearly designate agriculture and forest production as preferred uses in rural zones. Expand existing requirements to disclose to prospective neighbors that agricultural and forestry activities will occur on adjacent properties.
- B. Institute a buffer zoning policy to minimize land use conflicts brought about by urban uses encroaching into areas of agricultural production.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Public comments on the Draft Farm Preservation Strategies Report may be submitted through November 17, 2008. The Farm Preservation Advisory Committee will review the comments at a November 24, 2008 meeting. A final version of the report will be submitted to the Board of Clark County Commissioners this winter.

Comments should be sent to Patrick Lee, Legacy Lands Program Manager, 1300 Franklin St., Suite #185, P.O. Box 5000, Vancouver, WA 98666-5000. Comments may also be sent by e-mail to Patrick.Lee@clark.wa.gov. For more information visit www.clark.wa.gov/legacylands/.

